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Ravalli County Commissioners

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Dear Interested Public,

I am seeking your comments on a proposed ponderosa pine plantation thinning project for the Sula Ranger District in the vicinity of Swift Creek (see the attached map). This letter begins the formal scoping process.

**What is the origin of this proposal?**

The current ponderosa pine plantation thinning proposal is limited to 167 acres and aims to prevent or reduce wide-spread mortality due to mountain pine beetles which attack dense ponderosa pine plantations. This particular project found its origins through the work of a number of citizens who developed the Bitterroot Community Fire Protection Plan developed in 2003 ([www.bitterrootfireplan.info](http://www.bitterrootfireplan.info)) and updated as needed. The Fire Protection Plan strategy is a cooperative effort of volunteer fire chiefs, county officials, conservationists, community-based non-profit organizations, realtors, tourism and timber industry leaders, federal and state land managers, business people and interested residents. The group identified this area as high priority for restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems.

The Swift Creek Plantations were planted with ponderosa pine in 1966 following clear-cut harvesting and tractor scarification, with and without terracing. Under the Bitterroot National Forest Plan of 1987, and its Record of Decision, Management Area 3a Objectives would apply to 96 acres to optimize elk and winter range; and to provide moderate levels of visual quality, old growth and livestock forage. Management Area 2 Objectives would apply to 71 acres to maintain partial retention Visual Quality; manage timber; and to emphasize roaded dispersed-recreation activities, old growth and big game cover and provide moderate levels of timber, livestock forage and big game forage. This proposal is also supported by our management objectives for the Forest Plan, II-6 and II-8, II-14, II-28 (4).

I think it is crucial to follow through with timber stand improvement to protect this plantation from overcrowding, which can lead to stress and infestations of Mountain Pine Beetle. Overcrowding has already resulted in a preliminary stage of an IPS beetle infection in 40 plus year old ponderosa pine stand. The secondary objective is to restore fire adapted ecosystems through the reduction fuel loading in the wildland urban interface.

The compaction levels in the soil from 1966 have kept us out of these areas until recent studies have shown that as long as no new roads are built, the soils have substantially recovered and mechanized harvesting would be allowable. [*Springer II Project File*], [*Silvicultural Diagnosis & Prescription for Unit 66 Swift Creek Pine Plantations*, 2008, Sula Ranger District].



### **What is the purpose of the project?**

There are four elements to the purpose and need for this project:

1. Reduce the risk of wide-spread tree mortality caused by mountain pine beetle in ponderosa pine plantations.
2. Restore resiliency to natural processes and armor the stand to be more resistant to drought effects and climate changes over time by enhancing: vegetative species diversity, understory vegetation growth, and wildlife (game and non-game) habitat.
3. Reduce the risk from fire to structures and private forested land by reducing aerial fuels on National Forest Lands.
4. Demonstrate and evaluate alternative methods of restoring soils and removing small trees from terraced or mechanically scarified plantations.

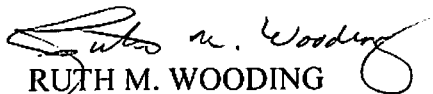
This purpose and need is consistent with the management direction found in the Bitterroot National Forest Plan. It is also my desire to follow through on previous harvest activities in a responsible manner to maintain the health and viability of these plantations, which support known elk habitat, by increasing their resiliency to drought conditions and climatic change. The secondary benefit will be enhanced fire protection for the community interface by reducing the fuel loading and mortality in this plantation while providing valuable opportunities for research of appropriate treatments of these 1960's era pine plantations.

### **What are the next steps in the process?**

Your comments to this proposal will be used to develop a more detailed proposal, to document key issues and to determine the level of environmental analysis needed. Any decision resulting from the analysis will be sent to people who respond to this scoping letter as well as those individuals and groups requesting a copy. Decisions will be subject to the administrative appeal process where individuals may request that the decision be reviewed by a higher organizational level of the Forest Service.

Please provide your comments by March 26, 2009. If you have questions regarding the proposal, please feel free to call Lee Mc Alpine, South Zone Silviculturist, at 821-2324, or me at 821-3201 or stop in to the Sula Ranger Station.

Sincerely,



RUTH M. WOODING

District Ranger: Sula Ranger District

Enclosures:

Vicinity & Project Maps

**Legend**

- Unit Boundary
- Stand
- Soil Units
- FACTS stand number

The map displays a topographic area with contour lines and a study unit boundary. The unit boundary is a thick black line. The map is labeled with various alphanumeric codes, including A210200020, A210100038, A210100001, A210100040, A210100050, A206100015, A210100052, A210200001, A210200021, A210200022, A210200009, A210200025, A210200007, A210200008, A210200006, A210200028, A210200003, A210200016, A210200026, A210200090, A210200005, A210100007, A210100011, A210100016, A210100005, A210100015, A210100048, A210100028, A210100002, A210100033, A210100025, A210100003, A210100004, A210100051, A210100020, A210100010, A210100002, A210100001, A210100004, A210100005, A210100006, A210100007, A210100008, A210100009, A210100010, A210100011, A210100012, A210100013, A210100014, A210100015, A210100016, A210100017, A210100018, A210100019, A210100020, A210100021, A210100022, A210100023, A210100024, A210100025, A210100026, A210100027, A210100028, A210100029, A210100030, A210100031, A210100032, A210100033, A210100034, A210100035, A210100036, A210100037, A210100038, A210100039, A210100040, A210100041, A210100042, A210100043, A210100044, A210100045, A210100046, A210100047, A210100048, A210100049, A210100050, A210100051, A210100052, A210100053, A210100054, A210100055, A210100056, A210100057, A210100058, A210100059, A210100060, A210100061, A210100062, A210100063, A210100064, A210100065, A210100066, A210100067, A210100068, A210100069, A210100070, A210100071, A210100072, A210100073, A210100074, A210100075, A210100076, A210100077, A210100078, A210100079, A210100080, A210100081, A210100082, A210100083, A210100084, A210100085, A210100086, A210100087, A210100088, A210100089, A210100090, A210100091, A210100092, A210100093, A210100094, A210100095, A210100096, A210100097, A210100098, A210100099, A210100100, A210100101, A210100102, A210100103, A210100104, A210100105, A210100106, A210100107, A210100108, A210100109, A210100110, A210100111, A210100112, A210100113, A210100114, A210100115, A210100116, A210100117, A210100118, A210100119, A210100120, A210100121, A210100122, A210100123, A210100124, A210100125, A210100126, A210100127, A210100128, A210100129, A210100130, A210100131, A210100132, A210100133, A210100134, A210100135, A210100136, A210100137, A210100138, A210100139, A210100140, A210100141, A210100142, A210100143, A210100144, A210100145, A210100146, A210100147, A210100148, A210100149, A210100150, A210100151, A210100152, A210100153, A210100154, A210100155, A210100156, A210100157, A210100158, A210100159, A210100160, A210100161, A210100162, A210100163, A210100164, A210100165, A210100166, A210100167, A210100168, A210100169, A210100170, A210100171, A210100172, A210100173, A210100174, A210100175, A210100176, A210100177, A210100178, A210100179, A210100180, A210100181, A210100182, A210100183, A210100184, A210100185, A210100186, A210100187, A210100188, A210100189, A210100190, A210100191, A210100192, A210100193, A210100194, A210100195, A210100196, A210100197, A210100198, A210100199, A210100200, A210100201, A210100202, A210100203, A210100204, A210100205, A210100206, A210100207, A210100208, A210100209, A210100210, A210100211, A210100212, A210100213, A210100214, A210100215, A210100216, A210100217, A210100218, A210100219, A210100220, A210100221, A210100222, A210100223, A210100224, A210100225, A210100226, A210100227, A210100228, A210100229, A210100230, A210100231, A210100232, A210100233, A210100234, A210100235, A210100236, A210100237, A210100238, A210100239, A210100240, A210100241, A210100242, A210100243, A210100244, A210100245, A210100246, A210100247, A210100248, A210100249, A210100250, A210100251, A210100252, A210100253, A210100254, A210100255, A210100256, A210100257, A210100258, A210100259, A210100260, A210100261, A210100262, A210100263, A210100264, A210100265, A210100266, A210100267, A210100268, A210100269, A210100270, A210100271, A210100272, A210100273, A210100274, A210100275, A210100276, A210100277, A210100278, A210100279, A210100280, A210100281, A210100282, A210100283, A210100284, A210100285, A210100286, A210100287, A210100288, A210100289, A210100290, A210100291, A210100292, A210100293, A210100294, A210100295, A210100296, A210100297, A210100298, A210100299, A210100300, A210100301, A210100302, A210100303, A210100304, A210100305, A210100306, A210100307, A210100308, A210100309, A210100310, A210100311, A210100312, A210100313, A210100314, A210100315, A210100316, A210100317, A210100318, A210100319, A210100320, A210100321, A210100322, A210100323, A210100324, A210100325, A21010